

Interaction with a U.S. Research Scholar

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On 19 Feb 13 a Round Table discussion took place at 1400h at CENJOWS with Mr. Daniel Kurtz-phelan, a Research scholar from United States who is on a research assignment in India. The theme of the discussion was “U.S. and India’s policies on China and East Asia”. Apart from the CENJOWS, interested personnel from the defence and think tank fraternity also participated in the discussions.

The discussion commenced with Mr. Phelan’s short talk wherein, he covered the American perception on the Emergence of China and importance of East Asia in American policy. He spoke briefly about his perception of US policy on China which he felt is besieged with misconception that United States wants to contain china’s economic and military rise. He emphasised that United States has deep economic engagement with China, further it is looking forward to developing the co-operative relations with China. Secondly, he also explained the importance of East Asia to America and its compulsion to engage the ASEAN states. Finally, he wished to ascertain from CENJOWS as to how our Indo-U.S. relations will impact the overall climate in East Asia in coming decade especially after U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Mr. Phelan opined that in East Asia, U.S. is involved in security partnership with ASEAN states generally to shape the security environment so that the ASEAN states could stand up and meet their security Challenges with out succumbing to pressures from any external power. The visits of U.S. dignitaries such as Secretary of state, Hillary Clinton and Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta of the East Asian states and Obama who personally attending the recent East Asia summit at Cambodia highlight this very aspect.

Responding to questions on China’s reaction to U.S. policy of pivot to Asia and to recently articulated policy statement in the media that United States will avoid direct involvement in the local crises but, support the cause from behind, Mr. Phelan opined that U.S. policy of Pivot to Asia merely focuses the U.S. interest to the region and is not directed against any regional power and the declaration notion of supporting the cause from behind is more related to phenomenon of Middle East where civil uprisings are of local origin with local aspirations hence, should find its

own solutions with out external interventions. To another question on china which allegedly have succeeded in bringing in some division in ASEAN ranks as was visible in the recent East Asia Summit which till now had presented a united front to China and how United States will deal with this new development? Mr. Phelan disagreed that United States is building any form of united front in the region, but it is engaged in building a cooperative atmosphere in the region to meet the challenges in the South China Sea. It is true that while Cambodia did air contrarian view in the East Asia summit but, it had also faced strong reaction from other ASEAN members.

The discussion also touched on the growing feeling that Pivot to Asia cannot be the answer to all ills in the region for the nature of the problems vary greatly in their nature and intensity for example we have the issue of South china sea on one hand and the issue of Iran and Afghanistan on the other hand. Pivot to Asia has created more confusion than providing a clear path in solving them as it is evident that in the growing security climate in the East Asia one is clear that multilateral approach cannot eventually solve the territorial issues but, it is also true that left to themselves, the ASEAN nations would positively fail if issues were taken by them at bilateral level with China.

The impact of overall economic down turn and resultant cuts in U.S. defence and its effect in the region was also discussed. Defence cuts have led to an apprehension in US allies in the East Asia about U.S. willingness/capacity to provide protection in case of adverse military situation in the region and this could be the cause of some of them trying to shore up their defence capability to tackle recent assertiveness of China. However, in overall perspective developing own defence capability is beneficial for their own security. The United States researcher also believed that recent problem of assertiveness by china in South China Sea and elsewhere can also be partly ascribed to the new leadership which is trying to project its nationalistic image with local political aim.

The slow or near stagnation of India America partnership following the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal of 2008 was also discussed. Our mutual relationship has not progressed much, despite contrary official declarations. For example, Indian entities still faces restrictive U.S. regime imposed in the wake of the nuclear test of 1998. This however, was agreed that while at the leadership level there is close understanding but, same still has to percolate down to the bureaucratic and functional level.

As regards to Chinese threat in the Northeast region, it emerged from the discussions that while India does not foresee escalation to our border dispute with China to a conflict level, in any case,

we are in position to thwart any Chinese assertiveness on our borders notwithstanding its continued close linkage with Pakistan whom it continues to bolster up against India. ASEAN states initially and later China has benefited from the economic engagements with United States. This has not happened with India as we continue to face restrictive practices in Indo- U.S. trade which must be removed. Developing multilateral power centres in the region would go long way in improving the security cooperative environment in the region.

(Proceedings recorded by Gp Capt (Retd) GD Sharma, VSM, Senior Fellow, CENJOWS).